

Book Reviews

Tadeusz Ślipko. The Polish Christian Philosophy in the 20th Century. Edited by Ewa Podrez. Krakow: Ignatianum University Press, 2019.

This new volume from the Polish Christian Philosophy in the 20th Century series focuses on Fr. Tadeusz Ślipko, S.J., born in Lvov, but for most of his academic life a professor in Krakow. His work spanned “general ethics,” concerned with the foundations of morality, “detailed ethics,” which includes both personal and social ethics, and bioethics, to which Ślipko was one of Poland’s earliest philosophical contributors. The volume under review contains two parts, the first serving as an introduction to Ślipko’s life and thought, written by several Polish scholars, and the second containing excerpts from Ślipko’s main works. Most Anglo-American philosophers will be unfamiliar with this work, which is edited by Ewa Podrez and translated by Małgorzata Wójcik for the first time.

Ślipko’s approach is fundamentally Thomistic, or neo-Thomistic, though he is ultimately concerned to effect a synthesis between Thomas and Augustine, and also to take on board the insights of phenomenology and existentialism. His work is, by his own account, an instance of “Christian philosophy.” Ślipko recognizes the tension in the conjoining of these terms: how can a work that is Christian, i.e. governed by the truths of Christian faith, be genuinely philosophical? His solution is that “Christian” in that phrase designates the historical sources of the philosophical effort, especially in St. Thomas.

But, Ślipko realizes, this raises a new question: why designate the work as “Christian philosophy” (or “Christian ethics”) instead of “Thomist,” or

"Augustinian," or...? The answer is precisely because Ślipko's Thomism is not "strict" Thomism, but is informed by insights of other philosophers such as Hildebrand, Blondel, or Marcel, all of whom shared with Thomas a fundamental worldview, even if they moved in novel philosophical directions. That fundamental worldview is theistic, spiritualist, and objectivist in a way that differs "fundamentally from numerous modern systems of secular ethics." "Christian philosophy," or "Christian ethics," is thus "designed to signal the existence of this sharp borderline" (109).

This argument has much to be said for it. Christian philosophy is, on this approach, still fundamentally philosophy; its grounding data is not revelation but that which is available to natural reason. Yet as the editors point out, Ślipko "rightly stressed that there is no such thing as a neutral approach to philosophy" (30), and the natural reason of a Christian surely resonates with some of the data of philosophy in ways that the natural reason of a secular atheist does not. So "Christian philosophy" or "Christian ethics" is neither oxymoronic nor empty of significance.

Ślipko's approach to the foundations of ethics is pluralist rather than reductivist. The point of departure for ethical theory is whatever moral phenomena may be discovered in man's moral awareness, such as "the experience of value, obligation, pursuit of goals, conscience, acts of choice and decisions determining our moral conduct in their proper way" (118). Which of these elements are "fundamental for the structure of morality," asks Ślipko, and he notes that moral theorists tend to reduce the basic ethical facts to one of these over the others. But Ślipko urges a more integral understanding, in which three elements are foundational: "the pursuit of a goal, the experience of a value, and the experience of an imperative" (119). In this way, aspects of Thomism, personalism, and deontology, can all be acknowledged.

The task of "detailed ethics" is to "formulate the principles of conduct with more precision in terms of content than the general moral principles (goal, good, imperative) which have been established in general ethics" (125). This purpose is a proper part of ethics, Ślipko argues, yet it is frequently ignored as "unscientific" in favor of "only the fundamental layers of morality" (128). Like Ślipko, I believe this is a mistake; to abandon detailed ethics is to abandon the project of attempting to provide guidance to ordinary people who are faced with practical questions. What, Ślipko asks, would even be the point of foundational ethics were it to go no further?

Yet Ślipko also warns against two dangers; one is that of a "code ethics", which distorts authenticity with "ready-made formulas"; the other is the existentialist rejection of moral norms altogether in favor of an empty

authenticity. Thomistic natural law, by contrast, joins the “ought” of what man must do to the realization of the perfection and fulfillment to which human beings are called. This is a sound and important insight.

The last fourth of the book contains a number of interesting discussions: of self-defense, the nature and genesis of community, and some issues in bioethics, such as surrogate motherhood and euthanasia. The editors tell us that in his later years, Ślipko no longer participated in discussions with “the ever more pluralized bioethics” (72), but they argue that the work he did can still contribute to Christian bioethics, and again, I agree with them.

I admire the work that has been gathered in this book, and congratulate the editors for bringing it to greater exposure in the English speaking world of Christian philosophy. Despite that admiration, I am going to end this brief review with a slightly critical note of comparison of Ślipko to his contemporary, Karol Wojtyła (Ślipko was born just two years before Wojtyła).

In a recent lecture “John Paul II and the Foundations of Ethics” given (virtually) on 14 December 2020 to the faculty at the Angelicum in Rome, John Finnis wrote of Karol Wojtyła,:

It seems to me – but this is certainly open to discussion and to better information than I command – that the original conceiving of *The Acting Person* as “an attempt at constructing Catholic ethics on the basis of Scheler’s philosophy” is evidence of two things. First, that Karol Wojtyła considered that the neo-Scholastic Thomistic presentations of ethics with which he was familiar were deficient in not, or not sufficiently, adopting the internal point of view – the viewpoint of the acting person – in expounding the structure of the human person and human freely chosen action. So he went elsewhere, to Scheler, in hope of finding more inwardness, thus at least implicitly conforming to the actual method of St Thomas by acknowledging that adequate critical knowledge of actions precedes, in the epistemological order, an adequate critical knowledge of nature, in this case human nature and structure.

And second, resort to Scheler’s philosophy was of little or no help – indeed, was I venture to think a distraction – in recovering what the neo-Scholastics had lost: an accurate understanding of the truly intelligent and intelligible human goods that are what first principles of practical understanding and reason direct us to – as St Thomas expounded, though not with unblemished clarity of exposition, in q. 94 aa. 2 and 3 of the *Prima Secundae*. To speak of “fulfilment in our actions”, as *The Acting Person* does right from the outset, is implicitly to speak of human goods (as we saw in the passage quoted at n. 13 above, from p. 150). But much remained to be made explicit and critically

defended. The project of *Veritatis Splendor*, announced in 1987 and completed six years and six days later, but certainly meditated earlier and longer, summoned John Paul II to an articulated, albeit incompletely articulated, exposition of those fundamentals of ethics.¹

Interesting and impressive as Ślipko's work is, I find that it too manifests the feature that Finnis believes Karol Wojtyła recognized in neo-Scholastic Thomism more generally: specifically, its lack of full attention to the perspective of the acting person.

There are three discussions in particular in this book that I find striking in regard to this methodological question. The first may be found in Ślipko's discussion of moral values. He writes:

There is a certain set of absolute and objective moral values defining ideal models of conduct corresponding to basic categories of human actions and representing the essential components of the order of moral good irrespectively of any individual attitudes or social or historical conditions (80).

This description fails, it seems to me, to recognize the insight of St Thomas to which Finnis draws attention above: that the foundations of ethics are to be found in human goods that are grasped by practical reason as reasons for action, that is, as promising benefit to the agent who grasps the good from a practical posture. The objectivity of such goods, while real, is not that of an existent thing, for such goods must be realized in human action. And they are fulfillments of our action much more than they are "models" against which conduct is to be compared, as it were, by a third person "look."

A second instance is found in Ślipko's discussion of self-defense. Ślipko frames the philosophical and moral puzzle to be worked out in justifying lethal self-defense as turning on the fact that human life is a "fundamental moral value" and that acts directed against that value cannot be morally neutral. Nor does the aggressor lose his personal dignity in his act of aggression. Ślipko is certainly correct to see this as the grounds of the problem.

But Ślipko denies the solution that has been traditional since St Thomas's treatment of killing in *Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 64: that in upright self-defense, the death of the aggressor is *praeter intentionem*, outside the intention, or, in some less than satisfactory formulations, only indirectly

1. <https://angelicum.longbeardco.com/uncategorized/2020/12/14/read-prof-finnis-lecture-john-paul-ii-and-the-foundations-of-ethics/>

intended. For Ślipko sees the defensive act as – indeed as obviously – aimed at the death of the aggressor:

one may not claim that the death of the aggressor is merely “tolerated,” “allowed for,” since the act of the acting person’s will is directly aimed at saving himself. One may concur with the claim that the intent of the acting person in his subjective experience is ultimately aimed at saving himself. It is still true, however, that it must be aimed with equal directness at the death of the aggressor. It is determined as such by the deliberate nature of the action taken in order to put the aggressor to death (145).

Ślipko offers an argument for this:

if facts are not measured against theory, one must admit that the action taken in defense against aggression is, in terms of causality, considering its inherently deliberate nature, precisely the same as the action of the aggressor, about which there is no doubt that in view of its inherently deliberate nature it is directly lethal. Thus, in both of these actions, death is the natural outcome (144).

But “causality” is not relevant to the assessment of an action considered in the moral order; what matters there is precisely what reasons motivated the agent from her own internal point of view. Was the agent motivated to defend herself by use of force, even if accompanied by possibly lethal harm? Or was she motivated to harm her aggressor in order to save herself? That these are even two possibilities cannot be determined by looking at causality, natural outcomes, or any other “natural” realities, but only by entering into the perspective of the acting person.

I turn finally to Ślipko’s analysis of the “genesis, philosophical description, essence, and purpose of community” (155). I again find striking Ślipko’s turn to natural causality and away from the reasons that bring human persons into community with one another. He writes that

the social determination of man represents a source, a kind of mechanism inherent to human nature, which does not need to be set in motion as it operates perpetually by the dynamic power of man’s very existence. Its actualization is not accomplished in the course of historical processes involved in the development of a society, nor can it be located in any specified moment of time which could be called the “formation” of community. From the standpoint of Thomistic philosophy, we can hardly talk about the historical genesis of

community. It takes the genesis of community to be merely a philosophical fact, and understands it to be the actualization of capacities man is endowed with as a social being (156).

Ślipko then moves through the description of community, as a “unity of plurality,” and the essence of community: “an objective and real unity, based on the essential structures of the human nature, while being internal as well, stemming from this nature and drawing on it for the power of interpersonal bonds” (161). And then, finally, to the “goal” of the community: “Having established the essence of what constitutes a community, we may now consider the goal, or the good towards which the community is aimed by its very nature” (161, my emphasis).

This, it seems to me, gets the order of explanation the wrong way round, for it is by understanding the reasons for which agents entered into community, or, precisely, “the good towards which the community is aimed,” that one comes to understand the nature (essence) and origin of the community. This is the essential insight of those who, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, both in Anglo-American philosophy (H.L.A. Hart, G.E.M. Anscombe, Germain Grisez) and in Polish philosophy (Karol Wojtyła), began to explore the practical realities of community, law, and action from the first-person perspective, also called the “internal” point of view.

Ślipko’s philosophical journey in some ways paralleled Wojtyła’s, as his conception of “Christian philosophy” indicates; he aimed to break free of the limitations of a narrowly constrained neo-Thomism by drawing on the work of twentieth century personalism and existentialism. His efforts in that direction are valuable and worth consideration, even if, in the end, Wojtyła saw more clearly the need for a more decisive methodological turn.

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